

Remarks of Vice President Walter F. Mondale, Ohio State University
Commencement, June 8, 1979 TRANSCRIPT

Now I know what it must be like on Friday night on High Street. (Applause) I'm glad the dentists are with us today. (Applause) This kind of dignity is what one expects from a great university. (Laughter)

President Enarson, Chairman James, Distinguished trustees, fellow recipients of honorary degrees, and especially the honored graduates of the class of 1979, your families and friends:

It is a privilege and an honor to be permitted to address the graduating class of what is truly one of the greatest universities on earth today. (Applause)

As a product of our own land grant university in my own state of Minnesota, I know what these magnificent institutions of higher education have meant to the lives of every one of the graduates today, and to the lives of thousands and thousands of citizens of this state, of this country, and literally of the world.

When President Lincoln signed the Land Grant Act, his purpose was to bestow the blessings of learning on all people. Here at Columbus, you have fulfilled that purpose. For this campus is as open and as free as the prairies of Ohio. More black Ph.D.s graduate from this university than from any other in the nation. For generations of students, rich and poor alike, old and young alike, this university has opened their minds to the wonders of knowledge and the challenges of the future.

And this morning, very briefly, I would like to speak about one of those challenges. I have been privileged to serve in public life now for nearly two decades. I've been in political life for nearly 3 decades. And if you ask me what concerns me most about the life that our children and our grandchildren will live, what single issue was most troublesome, I would not have the slightest difficulty in identifying it. What I fear above all, and what I think most Americans fear, is that the world will insanely resort to the use of nuclear weaponry. No other danger jeopardizes so completely the legacy of our civilization. No other peril threatens to trivialize so utterly the hopes and dreams symbolized by this commencement.

There is traveling around our nation today an exhibit that displays the treasures that have been excavated from the ruins of Pompeii. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have been drawn in terrible fascination to the relics of that disaster: the child with his dog, the merchant in his store, the table set for breakfast -- all frozen in time by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

More than the curiosity of Roman life and art has made that story so compelling. For what touches deep chords in us is the totality of the disaster: its suddenness, its power, its ability to destroy in a few moments the works of centuries.

For us, Pompeii is a distant mirror. For we, too, live in the volcano's shadow. But unlike a volcano, nuclear weapons are built by nations. And unlike a volcano, the power to reduce that risk lies in human hands.

When we speak the jargon of throw-weights and telemetry, we sometimes forget what it could really mean if it happened. Let me give you one example -- not to scare you, but to remind us all of what would happen if a single nuclear warhead exploded over the Oval on this campus.

First, there would be a blinding flash of light, and temperatures would rise to several times the heat of the sun. The entire University would vanish. Every structure within a mile and a half would be flattened. Cars would vaporize; huge boulders would be wrenched aloft and turned into radioactive dust. This entire campus and its 50,000 students would cease to exist. After the blast, winds of 300 mph would destroy the State Capitol buildings; clothing would spontaneously catch fire. And flames would spread beyond the Columbus Airport. And anyone in the open would suffer 3rd degree burns.

And farther away, as far as Canton, radioactivity would fill the air. This is just one warhead on one missile from the Soviet Union. And we can do the same to the Soviets.

That horror must never occur. We must work ceaselessly to make sure that this could never happen here, or anywhere on earth. And that is the reason that the President of the United States is going to Vienna next week to sign a long-overdue and arduously and carefully negotiated treaty to put a ceiling and a limit on the horrors of ever-rising nuclear deployment on this earth. (Applause)

Now in this great debate, which will take place and should take place, we will be presented, in my opinion, with several bad questions that need to be analyzed. The first is this: American power, it is said, has declined. We are now #2. Why should we sign a treaty that codifies our inferiority?

But to ask that question is to believe a profoundly inaccurate premise. I can state without any doubt that I state it correctly, that economically and politically and militarily and socially the United States is the strongest nation on earth, and it will remain so. (Applause)

Our defenses are unsurpassed, our will to resist is firm. Let me give you just one example of the massive power that we possess. Each warhead on one of our Poseidon missiles is twice as destructive as the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One Poseidon submarine carries more than 140 of these warheads. And each Poseidon can deliver more destructive force -- each Poseidon -- than all the bombs that were dropped in World War II. We have 31 such submarines, and they carry only a portion of our 20,000 nuclear weapons.

To those who say we are too weak, I'd like to ask this: How much power do we need? How many millions of people do we have to destroy more than once? The fact is that our nation is strong and will remain strong. And what we need now is the determination and the will to put a cap on the madness of the ever-rising nuclear war race that will take place in the absence of that treaty. (Applause)

The next bad question I hear is this: the Russians are our enemies. Why should we give them this treaty?

This treaty is not a gift to the Soviet Union. We are signing it because it serves our national interest. We're not doing it as a favor to them; this agreement is in our interests. It doesn't weaken us, it strengthens us.

The third question is, why should we trust the Russians to live up to that agreement?

The fact is that this treaty is not based at all on trust. It is based on the hard-nosed reality of suspicion. The language of this treaty is not so polite as to ignore the sad lessons of history. Our ability to verify this treaty is unquestioned.

So let us ask a few good questions about SALT. Will it stall the arms race? The answer is that it will. It places important limits on missiles, bombers, weapons, warheads and new systems. It requires the Soviet Union to dismantle 250 of their present long-range missiles.

Does it make us more secure? It will. By stalling the arms race, it stabilizes the strategic balance. By sustaining the rules of verification, it blocks cheating and camouflage. By capping warhead totals, it lessens the likelihood of nuclear war. By forging the link of mutual interest with the Soviet Union, it contributes to new paths of detente. By slowing the arms race, it tells other nations that we are responsible and mean business in our opposition to nuclear proliferation.

And finally, what happens if we fail to ratify this treaty?

As we meet here today, there are many, many so-called threshold nations who are within a very short distance of developing their own nuclear weapons. We are urging them not to resort to nuclear weaponry, to trust us, to follow our moral leadership.

If we are unable, as the largest holder of nuclear weaponry in the world, to ratify this reasonable restraint on our own power, how on earth are we going to exercise moral leadership with these nations and ask them to cease and resist?

Ten years ago, one of the finest products of a land grant university and a beloved friend of mine, Hubert Humphrey, said this: "Nuclear power has placed into the hands of men the power to destroy all that man has created. Only responsible statesmen who perceive that perseverance in the pursuit of peace is not cowardice, but courage; that restraint in the use of force is not weakness, but wisdom, can prevent international rivalries from leading to an incinerated world."

Let us summon today, as a nation, the statesmanship and wisdom of Hubert Humphrey and pursue the course of peace.

Thank you very much. (Applause)

###